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AUTHOR Hayward, Pamela A.
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ABSTRACT

Most evaluation of faculty takes place at the end of a semester. Because results of this type of evaluation are not available until after the semester is over, an instructor has no opportunity to make changes to a course while it is ongoing. This paper explains how the practice of midsemester evaluation can provide instructors with a formative evaluation tool that allows for changes while a course is in progress. Both faculty and students benefit from midsemester evaluation. Faculty receive suggestions on how to better gear the course to student learning styles. Students are reminded of their instructor's commitment to the teaching process and are also given a chance to see education as a proactive venture. Instructions on how to administer and process a sample midsemester feedback form are provided. Alternatives to the sample form are also addressed. (Contains 12 references. An early feedback form is attached.) (Author/RS)

Developing ourselves through the use of midsemester evaluation

Pamela A. Hayward

Augusta State University

Augusta, GA

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Abstract

Most evaluation of faculty takes place at the end of a semester. Because results of this type of evaluation are not available until after the semester is over, an instructor has no opportunity to make changes to a course while it is ongoing. This paper explains how the practice of midsemester evaluation can provide instructors with a formative evaluation tool that allows for changes while a course is in progress. Both faculty and students benefit from midsemester evaluation. Faculty receive suggestions on how to better gear the course to student learning styles. Students are reminded of their instructor's commitment to the teaching process and are also given a chance to see education as a proactive venture. Instructions on how to administer and process a sample midsemester feedback form are provided. Alternatives to the sample form are also addressed.

Developing Ourselves Through the Use of Midsemester Evaluation

The evaluative process can be frustrating for faculty. Evaluation generally takes place at the end of the semester and by the time the results are returned it is too late to use them for current course improvement (Keutzer, 1993).

The students are assessing something that has happened in the past, a product. The next time the instructor teaches that course, it will be a different class. The students, the context, the environment, and the communication situation will have changed. If we truly do want to utilize student opinion for the improvement of instruction, that input must come while the course is in process. (Trank, 1978, p. 2)

One way to receive input from students prior to end-of-semester evaluation is the use of a midsemester feedback form. In order to better understand the utility of midsemester evaluation as a faculty development tool, the general premises behind faculty evaluation first need to be explained. Course evaluation forms are utilized for two purposes: summative and formative evaluation. Summative evaluation "sums up" performance at the end of a time period and results in an overall judgment of teaching effectiveness (Centra, 1979). Student evaluations at many colleges and universities are intended to provide a basis for administrative decisions that influence salary recommendations, contract renewal, tenure and promotional decisions, and give faculty an incentive for putting time and effort into improvement of teaching (Barke et al., 1983; Murray, 1987; Redmond, 1982; Selmes, 1989).

Formative evaluation is used to improve performance. It is labeled "formative" because it is meant to help "form" performance while it is in progress (Centra, 1979). Formative evaluation is intended to provide staff with feedback that is useful for diagnosing instructional strengths and weaknesses (Murray, 1987). This feedback can provide the impetus for professional development activities aimed at improved teaching. Despite the usefulness of formative evaluation, faculty evaluation systems are preoccupied with summative judgments (Marincovich, 1998).

Instead of relying only on summative evaluation for feedback, an instructor can incorporate midsemester evaluation in a course. This practice gives the instructor a powerful formative tool that offers insight into student concerns about an ongoing course.

Benefits of Midsemester Evaluation

There are multiple benefits for both the instructor and students when midsemester evaluation is undertaken. The most obvious benefit is that midsemester evaluation provides an instructor with information that can be used to make changes in teaching styles during the current course (Keutzer, 1993; Office of Instructional Development, 1987). Student suggestions may even lead to new assignment and activity ideas for the instructor.

Additionally, faculty may find midsemester evaluation to be a confidence builder when teaching a new course or trying a new method. Positive reaction to the course can help reassure an instructor that their approach is working well.

The midsemester evaluation process can build student confidence as well because they receive the signal that their instructor is committed to the course and is open to making changes that can directly affect them (Holt & Moore, 1992; Office of Instructional Development, 1987). Students are also reminded of the proactive nature of education. They are empowered and better understand the collaborative nature of teaching and learning (Keutzer, 1993). Students are given an opportunity to provide feedback and witness the instructor's responsiveness to that feedback (Redmond, 1982).

Another benefit of formative midsemester evaluation as opposed to summative end-of-semester evaluation is that midsemester forms are not used for personnel decisions. This non-punitive format means that instructors can ask for student feedback without fearing adverse consequences from the administration (Keutzer, 1993; Office of Instructional Development, 1987).

The use of midsemester evaluation may also improve end-of-semester ratings. Although research in this area is controversial, results of studies conducted by Overall and Marsh (1979) and Price and Goldman (1981) indicate that when instructors were given a chance to review midsemester feedback and make changes this led to improved end-of-semester ratings.

Despite the benefits of using midsemester evaluation, keep in mind that midsemester evaluation may not always be appropriate. In order for midsemester evaluation to be fruitful, an instructor needs to be open and willing to make some of the changes students suggest. For example, if an instructor is teaching a new course they are not yet comfortable with, their ability to make changes may be limited. Instructors also need to be resilient in order to effectively use midsemester evaluations to their fullest potential. If an instructor is thin-skinned and tends to become defensive with the class when reviewing the results of the evaluation, they will be communicating to the class that they actually are not open to making changes despite the fact that they passed out an evaluation form.

Conducting the Midsemester Evaluation

Assuming a classroom situation is conducive to midsemester evaluation, the first step is choosing an evaluation form to use. Forms normally used at the end of the semester may be adapted for midsemester distribution. However, many end-of-semester forms do not allow students the sufficient opportunity to offer suggestions that would assist an instructor in making course changes. The form should include items that are behaviorally referenced since reflection on instructor behavior is the desired outcome of the process (Emmer, McBurnette, & Davis, 1974). A sample of such a form can be found in the Appendix.

Choosing the appropriate time to pass out the evaluations is important. The forms should be distributed around the midterm mark. Students should have already had a chance at that point to get feedback from the instructor on assignments and to get a sense of the teaching methods being used. There should be time available on the day evaluations are to be handed out for the instructor to explain why the evaluation is being conducted. There should also be ample time for students to fill out the form. It is best not to conduct an evaluation during a class period where an instructor is handing back papers, exams, or critiques. The scores students receive are fresh and may strongly impact comments on the evaluation form.

Before handing out the evaluations, the instructor should explain to students that they have responsibility for helping shape the course and the evaluation can assist the instructor in best adapting the course to the students' learning styles. The instructor should assure students

their comments will be anonymous. As with end-of-semester evaluation, the instructor should leave the room while the forms are being filled out and ask a member of the class to place the completed forms in an envelope.

Processing Midsemester Feedback

Once the midsemester evaluations are collected, they should be summarized. If more than one section of the same type of course filled out evaluations, each section should be analyzed separately since classroom environment will vary. A summary sheet of the results should be created in order to better identify trends.

The results of the midsemester evaluation should be shared with the students within one or two class periods after they were collected to highlight the importance of the student feedback. Holt and Moore (1992) explain that students' respect for the procedure and the instructor will be heightened if they see a quick turnaround with instructor's reactions.

When sharing the results with the class, the instructor needs to communicate in a nondefensive manner (Keutzer, 1993). The instructor should thank the students for their willingness to participate and then address the comments received by students. Begin with what students like, then what they feel needs improvement, and then offer plans to adjust or modify the course (Holt & Moore, 1992). If an instructor is unable to make some of the requested changes, they should explain why those changes are not feasible. Students should be reminded that they are also responsible for changes that need to take place in the class. This highlights the relational nature of classroom communication.

Alternatives to the Midsemester Feedback Form

There are alternatives to the above method of midsemester evaluation. One option is to hand out evaluation forms, but ask the students to take them home, type their comments, and then bring them back to class or to your mailbox. This option would allow for a stronger sense of anonymity, particularly if a class is small or you have frequently seen samples of their handwriting (Office of Instructional Development, 1987).

One may also choose to involve colleagues in the process. A faculty mentor may be asked to come into the classroom on the day of the evaluations and distribute and collect them

from the students. The faculty member and their mentor then could summarize the forms together and discuss strengths and areas that need improvement.

Instead of using written forms, a group discussion can serve as an evaluative tool. In a manner similar to how a focus group is conducted, a colleague or a trained facilitator would use part or all of a class period to engage students in an open discussion about what is and isn't working in the class. The choice of an effective facilitator is key to this type of midsemester evaluation. As Redmond (1982) points out, the facilitator must take care not to impose their own views on the students. The facilitator must also be skilled in handling conflict situations as students can become very vocal during this method of evaluation.

Regardless of the method used to obtain student feedback at midsemester, both the students and the instructor benefit from this practice. The instructor is given an opportunity to make changes while a course is ongoing, which is not possible with traditional end-of-semester evaluation. Students are also made aware of the instructor's commitment to the course. They are also made aware of the fact that they play a role in the success or failure of their instructional experiences. As Keutzer (1993) reminds us:

The primary purpose of evaluation is to improve performance. Just as students need feedback to improve their learning, teachers need feedback to improve their teaching. Immediate results are seen in the changes made to meet the needs of students and the instructor in a specific course. In addition, long-range improvement in overall teaching effectiveness is almost certain to occur. (p. 240)

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Appendix

Early Feedback

I would appreciate your assistance in helping me to understand how you are experiencing this course at this point in the semester. Please place an X in the space that best represents your response.

1. The pace of the class is (i.e., rate at which ideas and information are presented):

_____ too fast _____ _____ _____ too slow

Comments:

2. The objectives of the assignments are clearly presented:

_____ almost always _____ _____ almost never

Comments:

3. The objectives of activities and lectures are clearly presented:

_____ almost always _____ _____ almost never

Comments:

4. The instructor is accessible during class and office hours:

_____ almost always _____ _____ almost never

Comments:

5. The instructor cares about whether or not you learn something:

_____ almost always _____ _____ almost never

Comments:

6. Your classmates make responsible contributions to the class:

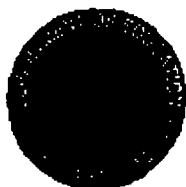
_____ almost always _____ _____ almost never

Comments:

General Questions

1. What aspects of the class and/or teacher most help you to learn?
2. What idea/concept discussed so far has been the most difficult and/or least interesting for you? Why?
3. What practical suggestions can you make to improve the class?

(This form was initially developed by Ann L. Darling.)



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